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STATE FOR SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE HOLBROOKE, EUR/WE, EUR/RPM
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SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE HOLBROOKE'S
MEETING WITH BELGIAN FOREIGN MINISTER YVES LETERME

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1. (SBU) Summary: Embassy Brussels warmly welcomes the visit of Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan Holbrooke and his meeting with newly appointed Belgian Foreign Minister Yves Leterme. Since a change of government in late 2007, Belgium has gone from regarding its military as "an ennobled humanitarian agency," in the words of Defense Minister Pieter De Crem, to "a small, reliable to f, already under cons trainernsn. End SQ Of its 120and send3rity to the airport in Kabul, has one OMLT in Kunduz, provides troops to a German led Provncial Reconstruction Team in Kunduz and bases four F-16's in Kandahar. In April 2009, tQe government promised to extend its existing commitments through 2010, to supply a second OMT, training and another PRT. QNote: a consensus seems to be developing in the GOB that a PRT is too expensive for Belgim to run.) It is willing to send crew for AWACQ planes if NATO approves that mission. BudgeQ limitations make any significant increase inmilitary operations unlikely, but the government has promised to double its development assistance to 12 million euros per year in 2009 and 2010.

13. (SBU) As more Belgian troops are sent to Afghanistan, they are increasingly exposed to danger. Memories of the massacre of ten Belgian paratroopers in Rwanda in the early 1990's make the country sensitive to any possibility of harm to its soldiers. The government, and especially Defense Minister De Crem, take frequent criticism from the press and Parliament for the danger, for perceived futility of the mission and for allegedly failing to share information with members of the Parliament about the soldiers' rules of engagement. De Crem has successfully countered such criticism, and has begun to do more to argue publicly the link between terrorism in Europe and success or failure in Afghanistan. Public acceptance of the message is important to maintaining the military effort (especially if it results in casualties) and increasing development aid. De Crem has had to promise to deploy Belgian troops only in the North of Afghanistan (except for the F-16 crews in Kandahar and the security force at Kabul Airport), because the North of the country is perceived to be less risky. However, Belgian troops in the North recently came under sustained attack while patrolling with the Afghan soldiers they are mentoring. Foreign Minister Leterme is new, but could become more involved in explaining the mission to the public. His predecessor, Karel De Gucht, was more skeptical of the mission and much less vocal in supporting it than De Crem.

4.(SBU) With budgets severely constrained by the economic crisis, defense spending is likely to remain static for the foreseeable future. The GOB's priority will be fulfilling the promises it has already made to augment military operations with the second OMLT (now expected to arrive in December 2009 or January 2010 rather than September 2009 as originally planned), and the two new F-16's. The Belgian government may be able to offer more in development assistance, albeit reluctantly.

¶5. (SBU) Belgium has designated 18 "partner countries" to which it provides direct bilateral assistance administered by its aid agency, Belgian Technical Cooperation, with offices in-country. It provides assistance to other countries, including Afghanistan, through grants to UN agencies, other

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international agencies and some NGO's. Examples of Belgian NGO's operating in Afghanistan are Solidarite Afghanistan Belgique and Mothers for Peace. In 2008, Belgium provided 7 million euros to Afghanistan. The 12 million euros it has promised for 2009 would be 0.72 percent of its 1.6 billion euro assistance budget for 2008. Much of Belgium's official development assistance (ODA) is focused on African countries. Its largest recipient, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, received 122 million euros or 7.4 percent of total ODA in ¶2008. All but one of Belgium's 18 partner countries receive more assistance from Belgium than Afghanistan.

¶6. (SBU) One area where Belgium is likely to contribute in the future is police training. The Belgian Federal Police have recently completed a report to Minister Leterme and to Interior Minister Annelie Turtelboom that recommends the sending of two to four police trainers to join the EUPOL-Afghanistan training mission, if appropriate security protections are available to the Belgian trainers. Leterme and Turtelboom must soon make a decision on whether to go ahead with that. Leterme will be interested in your evaluation of the security aspects of the EUPOL-A mission.

¶7. (SBU) Themes for press appearance: Embassy suggests the following themes for your five-minute television interview with the Belgian press: Express strong appreciation for Belgium's military contributions and show familiarity with them. Say that the Afghanistan operations demonstrate that Belgium is a trusted and capable ally in maintaining global security. Acknowledge that Afghanistan operations entail risks, North and South, but note that U.S. and other foreign troops are running those risks (and more) right along with the Belgians. The risks are necessary in light of the very real threat to Belgian, European and world security posed by terrorists and narcotics smugglers who would like to use Afghanistan as a base. Emphasize the many needs for development assistance that also contribute to stability, discourage radicalism and encourage further Belgian contributions in that way. Note progress that already has been made to date.

¶8. Talking points for use with Foreign Minister Leterme:

-- Very much appreciate Belgium's efforts in Afghanistan, both military and in development assistance.

-- I think you agree the success of our effort in Afghanistan and Pakistan is directly linked to security in Belgium, Europe and America. Can you do more to help ensure that is understood by the Belgian public?

-- There are many very important development assistance needs in Afghanistan.

-- Will appreciate additional assistance beyond the 12 million euros per year (approximately 0.72 percent of total ODA) that Belgium has promised for 2009-10.

-- Understand your government is considering sending police trainers to join EUPOL-Afghanistan. Your personal support for doing so would be much appreciated. Will you?

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